

# FIRST THINGS

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## POP IMPERIALISM

A REVIEW OF *THROUGH A SCREEN DARKLY*

by Roger Scruton

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*Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad*

BY MARTHA BAYLES

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During the Cold War the United States government made important attempts to manage America's image in the world. Besides the radio stations—Voice of America and Radio Free Europe—and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, there was the U.S. Information Agency, whose aim was to ensure that an upbeat and truthful image of America would prevail against the adverse propaganda of the Soviet Union. The USIA was closed down in 1999, and the scope of the radio networks has been curtailed.

One consequence of this—lamented at length by Martha Bayles—is that the image of America in the world is now entirely the product of American popular culture, which has succeeded in giving a worse name to America than anything that could conceivably have been implanted by the Soviet propaganda machine. The Muslim peasant in his village has only to turn on the television to witness the Great Satan *in flagrante delicto*, and even if he is not immediately prompted to join al-Qaeda he is likely to be glad that others are doing so, with a view to punishing the blasphemies and obscenities that pour out across the screen.

Martha Bayles is an intelligent, learned, and sensitive person who has spent a long time studying the world of morons, apparently without going mad in the process. Her earlier book, *Hole in Our Soul*, described the loss of beauty in American popular music, and drew attention to a singular fact, which is that the music of modern life, which was born in

America, has also died there. And the same has happened to the drama of modern life. Just as the life-affirming melodies of jazz have declined into the tuneless aggression of rap, so have the innocent romances of Hollywood morphed into movies in which explicit sex and manic violence are almost the only points of interest.

It is this second transformation that concerns Martha Bayles in her latest book, and the reader quickly learns why. She describes reality TV designed to pour scorn on humanity; raunchy comedies addressed to the lowest of voyeuristic appetites; and scenes of destruction, profanity, and narcissism that seem to have no other purpose than to remove what small marks of value still attach to the American family and the American way of life. It is a mark of my comparative innocence that I was shocked to read about these things. Rumors of *Big Brother* and *Sex and the City* have, in recent years, reached the gates of our farm. And I regret to say that the children have at last prevailed on me to install a television. They have yet to persuade me to turn it on, however, and after reading Bayles I doubt that I shall.

Bayles's concern is not so much with the awfulness of American popular culture as with its effect on the wider world. She has travelled in the Middle East, India, and China, exploring the views of people who have had the opportunity to compare American soaps, movies, pop songs, and video clips with the native products. Her fascinating description of the world's favorite TV shows suggests that many of those local products have negotiated the difficult business of being true to modern life without departing too far from the constraints of customary morality. Sometimes the state steps in to ensure this—as in Saudi Arabia. Sometimes, as with Bollywood and the Turkish soaps that have had such an influence across the Middle East, popular taste exerts the kind of pressure toward family values that seems to have largely disappeared from America.

I found this part of Bayles's narrative rather reassuring. But the implication is that the respite from the crass sensuality of the American product is at best only temporary. Since nothing is done to control the monsters who are producing it—porn and sadistic violence being protected as “free speech” in America—and since the Internet ensures that barriers are transgressed with impunity, the lowest forms of human life will in due course dominate the

screen in every living room, and the blame for this will fall squarely on America. Of course, that will be unjust. The blame for watching destructive images falls on the person watching them. The problem is that people are sorely tempted beings, unable to protect themselves from their own worst desires without the help of a culture that backs up their efforts.

Bayles ends her book with a series of suggestions as to how the American government might recapture the diplomatic high ground. After all, there is a high culture of America. There is a right and proper use of American freedom. There are occasional stabs at decency in the world of the soaps and Hollywood epics. Sometimes, on the screen, people are seen fighting for honorable causes, and attracted to each other in ways that might lead to love and commitment. And, in my experience and also in Bayles's, that is the *real* America, observable to all who take the trouble to spend some time outside the coastal cities. Furthermore this real America occasionally finds its way into a pop song, a movie, or a TV sitcom.

I read that part of Bayles's book with sympathy but, I confess, a measure of skepticism. Unless and until Congress and the Supreme Court wake up to the damage done by explicit sexual images, these images will be the annihilating center of money-making dramas that have little or nothing else to recommend them. No diplomacy will be able to neutralize these images, as they find their way into the hearts and minds of people for whom the mystery of the other sex was, until this moment, fundamental to their life projects. The problem Bayles is describing is not a problem of diplomacy, but a problem of culture. American popular culture is popular because that is the way many Americans think of themselves. And they think of themselves in that way because the barriers to being that way no longer exist.

**A**s Bayles remarks, sex is seen in the standard yuppie soap as an event whose sole meaning is pleasure. It occurs between young people—younger every day—who are ambitious for themselves but largely indifferent to others. And it is detached from the past and the future. The effect of this view of sex is apparent throughout society. It underlies the belief that abortion should be a constitutional right, and has produced a new kind of sex education—essentially, instructions for having fun without having babies.

Arab and Indian societies reflect the older idea of sex, as a secret thing, not to be put on display or reduced to a moment of pleasure, but to be contained within the bonds of affection and respect that link the generations along the great chain of being. You don't need much knowledge of literature or evolutionary psychology to see that the old idea reflects what human beings fundamentally are. Given what is obvious, it is hardly surprising if human nature is now taking its revenge, and taking it on America.

Bayles has interesting things to say about the way American popular music undermined totalitarian government. It is depressing, though true, that it was not Beethoven but the Beatles who brought down the Berlin wall. Her discussion reminded me of my own experiences as an unofficial cultural diplomat during the 1980s. My self-appointed task was to give support to the dissidents in Eastern Europe, and this inevitably brought me into contact with young people who were striving to find an alternative to the nihilism that the communists promoted.

Although it is true that many of the young were drawn to their quaint versions of Anglo-American pop—the Czech group Plastic People of the Universe being well known in this respect, on account of their notorious jail sentence—they did not regard this as a departure from the high culture and Christian heritage of Europe. Those good things were attractive partly because the communists hated them, but more importantly because they were part of a world of meaning that was still real and available.

The lyrics provided to the Plastic People by Magor, as he was called—an art historian with a highly mystical worldview—were genuine poetry in the Czech surrealist tradition. And the young people whom I knew in Czechoslovakia found solace in the music of Janáček and Martinů, in the novels of Kafka and Švejk, and in the art and architecture of a country that the communists had tried in vain to remove from the archive.

Much was gained by the liberation of Eastern Europe from communism; something too was lost. After 1989, American popular culture became the obstreperous and unignorable voice of a new and liberated world. Almost overnight, the young people of Eastern Europe let go of

their past, and with it, the things that had inspired their search for freedom. What they obtained was freedom, too—but a freedom released from all the constraints that make freedom valuable. And no cultural diplomacy will give them back what they have lost.

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